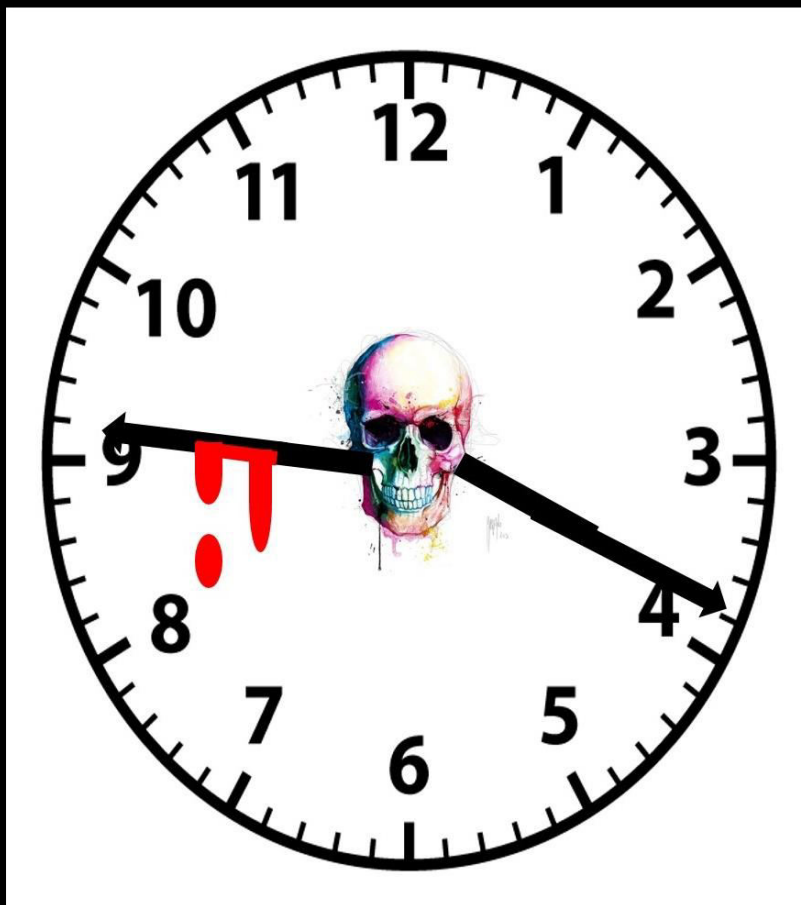


Brian McAleer

9:19



Welcome to the
last minute of your life

“9:19”

a short story by Brian McAleer

1

September 19th, 2009.

9:18am

Ben Preston is late for work, but assumes if he can walk in before 9.30am, the boss will only be disappointed and not angry. At his final manoeuvre to reach his destination he has to cross a busy t-intersection. The large digital clock on the tallest building overlooking the street says 9.18am, then turns to 9:19am as Ben steps out onto the road. Then, he blacks out.

When he comes to, he is lying on the ground, his face pressed on the hard, hot bitumen. He sees his left arm stretched out and his palm facing up, and there's blood on his fingers and something sharp stuck in the base of his left thumb. His watch is facing down on the ground. As Ben corrects the position of his wrist, he discovers the face of his silver watch is smashed. Ben feels heat all around him and can hear muffled voices coming from every direction.

“Are you okay?” he hears, or thinks he does. Ben rises to his knees, his vision blurred, so he shakes his head and looks around. There are bodies all around him; bloody, burnt and twisted. He sees flames, small and large, surrounding him on all sides. Whatever caused those fires, he hoped emergency services were on the way. But he hears no sirens. A woman appears in his vision.

“Mister, did you hear what I said? Are you... alright? Are you hurt?” she asks, extending out a hand. Ben grabs it and pulls himself up slowly, with the woman's arm under his.

“I think so. What happened?” he asks, as his vision begins to slowly improve. The woman before him appears uninjured.

“Let's get you out of the street first” she says, gently pulling Ben's hand. He lets her do so, taking one stilted step, then his legs buckle. Ben grabs his left knee, the pain is dull and sharp. He pushes forward, grunting.

“Can you walk?” the woman asks.

“I think so” Ben shakes his head again, and his vision continues to get better like a camera lens coming back into focus. Ben takes a few more steps and reaches the pavement. Now under the shadow of a scaffolding, it feels cool and safe and he can see everything from where he is. There are bodies all over the ground, ten, maybe even twenty. Most lie still, but two of them get up. A truck has flipped over, with its shipment of gas cylinders spilt out all over the street. On either side of the truck were two cars, smashed up against the truck's face, and one of the vehicles is on fire. The heat blazes as black and white smoke billows out of every space. There are cracking and banging sounds, and the sound of glass shrieking under the pressure of the heat, then exploding in a high pitched smash.

“We should move” the woman says.

“So many people” Ben says, then feels a sharpness in his mouth. Rolling his tongue around, he feels a sharp object and then spits it into his right hand. It’s covered in thick, warm blood. Pushing the object around with his finger, he sees it’s a chunk of glass.

“But we need to help these people” he says, dropping the bloody glass.

“You’ve helped them enough” the lady insists “I saw you. Now, let’s get you looked at”. She was still holding Ben’s hand, now pulling it more firmly.

“Wait... what? I... helped them?” Ben asks. Suddenly his full sense of awareness is back and his vision is perfectly clear. For a moment, the pain in his knee and left thumb are gone, and he feels incredibly light. The woman’s words have robbed him of any sense of being there; almost like an out-of-body experience. “No, I didn’t. I was knocked out. I didn’t help anyone. Couldn’t have”

“You did. I just saw you run out from behind that car, dragging two people with you. There, those people who just stood up” the woman said pointing behind him. Ben whipped around to the carnage in the intersection where a man and woman stammered over to the pavement across the street from Ben, and surveyed the damage.

“But... I was knocked out”

“I’m positive it was you sir. One second there was a crash, a flame, and I ran over. Then, you just appeared with the man and woman. Some smoke covered my sight, and when it cleared you were gone. You don’t remember doing any of that?” the woman asked, now letting go of Ben’s hand and taking a cautious step backwards. She stared at him in confused horror.

“No, I don’t remember any – *wait*. No. I remember being...” Ben closed his eyes, spun himself around and pointed aimlessly across the intersection. An image came to his mind of himself, standing on the pavement, rushing to get to work, looking at the large digital clock with the red numbers he would see every day on his way to the store, and the numbers turning over to 9:19am. “Then... I stepped out onto the street, and... got up *here*. What time is it now? I must have been out for several minutes. God, just look at this damage” Ben said, catching his breath, looking at his watch, the silver analogue. Given it to him on his birthday three years ago by his father.

“Its 9:20” the woman said, looking at her watch.

“9.20? That was only a minute I was out for?” Ben asked “It couldn’t have been” Ben brought his own watch up to his face, wiping some black stuff off the face of it. He could see through the cracked glass that the minute hands were not moving. Tapping the watch in a bid to get it going, there was no response. But from peering closely, he could clearly see the minute hand rested on 9.20am. Indeed, only a minute had passed.

“What the hell happened here? What happened...*to me*?” Ben asked, sitting down on the pavement. The woman remained close, but stood behind him, her arms folded protectively, that confused look growing deeper on her face. Just then, another man ran up to them both from down the pavement with a mobile phone in his hand.

“I’ve just rung triple zero. Help is on the way. I saw the whole thing happen. How did you do that mate?” the stranger asked in ravaged excitement. A second later, Ben realised the man was talking to him, so he looked up at the stranger slowly.

“Do what?”

The man still holding his phone in his hand, uninjured, looked at Ben in confusion.

“I mean, how did you save all those people? You’re a hero mate”

In the seconds after this, which felt like minutes, Ben grew aware more people were gathering around him, and stood up from his spot on the pavement. They looked at him with a mix of amazement, confusion and suspicion.

"I don't know how I did that. I don't... remember" Ben said, as the sounds of sirens wailed in the distance. And as the crowd continued to gather around the man of the moment, the faces were a blur to Ben, except one he saw for just one split second; and on top of this face was a black hat, and the eyes of the face looked directly at Ben, and the face was smiling. A knowing smile. Then, the face was gone, as more bystanders appeared on the scene in a large crowd.

2

As emergency vehicles arrived on the scene, a paramedic walked swiftly up to Ben and examined him. Ben let himself be guided into an ambulance, where he sat with another man with just a sprained wrist. Sometime later, Ben arrived at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, was walked into the emergency ward and led to a bed, where he sat, and waited.

"So, you have no memory of the accident. Don't remember dragging people away from the burning cars?" asked the doctor, who had two nurses standing behind him, looking at Ben studiously.

"No. Nothing" said Ben, even as the events of the morning before the accident regained some clarity as he forced himself to try and remember. But nothing came to him after the moment he stepped off the pavement and onto the road.

"It sounds like you've experienced some shock Ben, and your memory should return to you in time. In situations like the accident from this morning, people can experience an adrenaline rush, as their survival mode kicks in. You may very well have chosen to assist in that moment, and just don't remember it because of the over-stimulus of your senses" said Doctor Roberts. Ben looked up with a caught off guard expression. This sounded more like a diagnosis of a psychologist rather than the examination of a doctor.

"So am I okay to go then?"

"Yes of course, I will prescribe you some pain killers. But before you leave, I suggest you stay in town for a few days. Take some time off work, rest, and allow your memory to return. It's likely you will start to recollect the incident gradually over the next forty-eight hours. And as that happens, you may start to experience vicarious trauma, which is why I will give you the details of our hospital appointed psychologist, who –"

"Vicarious? Meaning...?"

"Second-hand trauma Ben, as a result of witnessing the accident but not being seriously injured or killed. The scene may replay in your mind over and over, causing some stress and anxiety"

"Okay" Ben said, slowly lifting himself off the bed. "I'll look into. Thank you, doctor".

He got his prescription and as he walked out of the emergency ward, Ben didn't notice Doctor Roberts observing at him until he was out of sight. Pulling out a phone from his inside pocket, the doctor turned to the nurses behind him, nodded, and they walked away. He dialled a number, and his call was answered almost immediately.

"Yes... Tom? Roberts here. I think you'll be getting a new patient soon... Yes, like the last one. I think he experienced it... and I'm waiting on the CCTV footage from

the accident... if our friend in the black hat is on camera in the crowd somewhere, then we'll know for sure... Okay, keep me posted...bye for now” said the doctor.

3

Ben had to explain his morning over the phone to his boss three times; each retelling getting more frustrating as his boss was thorough in his questions, as always. Ben got his approval to take three days off, and happily hung up on his boss. He made a few calls; first his mum, then his sister, telling them both the news. His mum cried. His sister was silent in shock.

Ben turned on the TV, and flipped stations aimlessly. Every commercial break had a news update on the accident. It was the same on every station. The radio played softly in the kitchen, as Ben liked to put it on for background noise. Every hour on the hour, the radio news retold the story of the “Horror Accident in the CBD” and Ben still couldn’t grasp that he had been there and survived it. And his confusion over no memory of his actions had turned into frustration. He wanted to know what happened, what he did, and how he did it. Thinking back to the doctor’s advice, he lay down on the couch, and dozed off.

In a dream, Ben was back at the intersection, but it was night time. The after effects of the accident were there; burnt out buildings, broken glass on the road, and yellow tape with HAZARD written on it, pasted in large X’s across almost every building window and doorway. But the intersection was quiet, with no cars driving through it. The street lights were not lit, and there was a cold wind; Ben could feel it on his arms and face. Despite it being empty, Ben was not alone in this intersection. One of the streetlights came on, sending a dull yellow beam of light down to the street, and into the light stepped a dark figure. Wearing a long black coat, black boots and a black hat, wide brimmed and pulled down low on the face. The only sound was the echo of those black boots on the ground. Ben stood back, bemused and alert. The dark figure, probably a man, looked up, and the face was cast in shadows. The mouth opened to reveal large white teeth, and a smile that stretched gleefully across the face. “9:19” said the mouth with a raspy voice, then the street light went out, plunging everything into darkness. Ben could feel a rush of energy move through his body, then he woke up. His body shot up with a violent jerk from the couch he fell asleep on, and the TV was still on, providing a bluish light in the living room. It was night time, with all the lights in the house off. Ben got up, walked to the wall and switched on the living room light. The clock on the wall said 11:45pm. He’d been asleep for eight hours, but to Ben, it felt like only a minute. He didn’t go back to sleep that night, but rather sat upright on the couch in the living room, and for some reason, just watched the clock on the wall tick by. Not really watching the clock but rather trying to understand the dream he just had, and pinpoint the thing about that dream which was familiar. And it wasn’t the intersection. It was the feeling he had in the dream, of something ominous, a presence. He had felt it before.

4

As 6:30 in the morning crept up on him, Ben watched the news again. The first story of the hour was of course the accident in town yesterday morning. The newsreader explained the sequence of events, which was backed up with a computer animated

video of the accident. Ben watched intently, as the newsreader commentated the video;

“At approximately 9:18 am, a city bus, drove down the middle of the intersection, where it appears all the tyres on its left side blew out at once. The bus careened of its course, and drove along the pavement for a few seconds, where it then spun around almost 180 degrees and stopped in the middle of the intersection. Cars from the opposite direction barely had time to stop, slamming into the side of the bus one after another. Within seconds, a truck carrying two hundred gas cylinders could do little to stop itself, and in trying to swerve instantly flipped on its side, sending dozens of cylinders out onto the street. They bounced across the road like tennis balls, flying through shop windows and knocking pedestrians off their feet. The carnage continued as another truck turning into the intersection sharply, swerved to miss the bus and drove straight into a café, where its engine exploded, sending a ball of fire through the café, and incinerating everything inside. Luckily, the three people inside made it safely out the back door with only a second to spare. The fire then sparked an additional fire which started in the next building, leaving that store in ruins. CCTV camera footage captured most of the accident but due to the graphic nature of the scene we are unable to show it to you, however from a description of the footage provided by the Victorian Police, an unidentified man walked out into the intersection at the same time the bus drove through it, narrowly missed being hit and then seemed to appear on the other side of the intersection within a second. Smoke blocked the vision of the camera from this point, but several eyewitnesses at the scene reported this man rescued several people from the centre of the accident, and moved at an extremely fast pace about the scene. Police have yet to confirm the identity of the man, but it is believed he was taken away by paramedics” the news broadcaster finished, trailing off to another story. Ben turned the TV off. Watching the computer animated retelling of the accident in such detail with its clear explanation by the newsreader still did not bring back any memories of his own, and Ben couldn’t accept he was that man the news had spoken about. The camera footage had confirmed it, several people on the day came up and said he had rescued people. But for some damn reason, Ben still couldn’t remember a thing.

He paced throughout his house that morning, ignoring his phone as it rang, and refusing to put the TV or radio back on. On his fridge, held in place by a magnet from his trip to Thailand, was the card the doctor had given him at the hospital. Plain white, with “Tom Jennings, Psychologist. Specialising in trauma, grief and loss” written in small, black letters, and a mobile number. Ben pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialled the number.

A warm, friendly voice said “Hello?”

“Yes, hi, my name is Ben Preston, and I was given your card at the hospital”

“Ah yes, Ben, I was hoping you would call. Doctor Roberts mentioned he had spoken to you about possibly meeting me. How are you? After that accident?”

“I’m okay. Not hurt badly. But, I’m having trouble... remembering it”

“That’s okay. I can help you. Let’s meet. Are you free tomorrow at 11am?”

“Yes” Ben said, and the appointment was made. Ben felt better, and as he ended the call, the time on his phone caught his attention. It was 9:19am. What didn’t catch his attention, were the eyes looking through the kitchen window. The eyes were shadowed by a black hat. The eyes, grey and fixed firmly, started at Ben for a minute, hidden in the backyard bushes.

5

Ben decided to take the train into the city the next day for his appointment. He didn't feel he had the muster to drive, in terms of concentration and also because he had walked away from a massive pile up. Cars were not his preference right now. On the forty minute ride, he swapped his vacant stares out the window with glances down to his silver watch; now clean after the accident, but still dead on 9:19am with its cracked glass face. He thought of his father, who passed away last year, and how important this watch was to his dad. He had worn it for years, as a gift from his father, and now it was Ben's. But he couldn't keep it safe, and for that, he felt remorse.

The walk from the train station to the building was about ten minutes. Ben walked slowly, as the world whizzed by fast and frantically; just another day in the city, continuing as it always did, even after the worst pile up in its history. Arriving at the high-rise building, Ben gazed up at its many levels as he walked in, surprised a psychologist would be based there. Weren't they usually in smaller buildings or old houses done up as offices, he wondered. Referring to his phone with the text message sent to him, Ben followed the instructions to the second elevator on the right, and pressed the button for the 29th floor. The ride up was quick, and he had the elevator to himself. He would have preferred some company in the elevator, as being alone right now meant his troubling thoughts were louder, and bugging him.

As the elevator doors opened, a receptionist behind a large counter greeted Ben.

"Can I help you sir?"

"Dr Tom Jennings please, I have an appointment"

"You'll have to get back in the lift. You're on the 29th floor, he's on the 19th"

"Really? I thought his message said..." Ben began, and then pulled out his phone. The text message did indeed say 19th floor, suite 109. "Okay, my mistake. Thank you". He returned to the elevator, and this time it was full of men in suits. Ben had to shimmy his way to the back corner for a spot, as no one even moved an inch to let him in.

They were all engaged in their conversations about meetings, monthly reports and financial projections. Ben eavesdropped with little interest. He got off on level 19, and walked out into an empty corridor. A small sign on the wall had "Suites 99-109" written on it and an arrow pointing left. Ben continued his walk, and came to a large brown door. The numbers 19-109 were large and black, stamped on the centre of the door in an "in-your-face" kind of way. Ben knocked, and a few seconds later, the door was answered by a short man, with silvery hair and thick glasses.

"Welcome, Ben?" he said, in a smooth, mature voice.

"Yes" Ben said, shaking the man's hand.

"Dr Jennings. Come on in"

6

Ben got through his spiel to the question, "Tell me about yourself?" and as he wrapped it up, Dr. Jennings jumped straight into the hot topic.

"Tell me about the accident" as if ordering Ben to do so. Ben took a moment, gathering his thoughts and looking around the room.

“What was the first thing you remember before blacking out?”

“Seeing the clock turn to 9:19. Not really worth remembering, but for some reason I did. And I’ve been seeing that number around since. Maybe because I’m looking for it...” Ben suggested.

“Not exactly... I could present another theory, but I’m getting ahead of myself. First, I think it’s important we revisit the accident in as much detail as you can. This can get heavy and taxing on you, but it’s important for you to do this; to identify the key moments that are sticking in your mind”

“And how do we do that?”

“I’m, going to take you through a guided process of sorts, like – “the doctor was cut off.

“Hypnosis?” Ben asked.

“No, I don’t practice that rubbish. Pardon me, I mean, I don’t use that technique. Have you had it before?”

“No. but I thought psychologists used it often?”

“Not all psychology is what you might have seen in the movies Ben. Some do practice it, but this is more like a trance I’m about to take you through? Do you know what I mean by that?”

“No, but I’ll go with whatever you recommend”

“You want to move on from this, I can see. And this does work. But just to forewarn you... in these trance experiences, patients can describe feeling like they’re *out* of their body. Like they’re back in the place where the trouble started. Are you okay with that possibility?” Doctor Jennings asked, with more curiosity than concern.

“To be honest, I feel like I never left the scene. I had this really vivid dream the other night, and saw something in it that wasn’t right. It was... a man. He was all dark. Maybe it was Death himself?” Ben asked thoughtfully.

“Let’s come back to that. Just lie back in your chair, and we’ll begin”

7

With his body laid back, the smell of incense wafted up his nostrils. It was smoky and aromatic, making Ben’s nose twitch slightly, which he addressed with a strong scratch.

“Is the incense too much?” the doctor asked.

“It’s fine”

“I’m going to dim the lights and make the room a bit darker now” and the doctor closed the blinds and turned off the lights “Comfortable?”

“Fine” Ben said, aware it was the second time he said *fine*, which he wasn’t and assumed the doctor was onto him.

“Good. Now relax your body, starting with your toes...” the doctor said, and talked Ben through relaxing the rest of his body. The doctor’s voice got lower and almost muffled. Feeling warm a moment ago, Ben was now feeling a chill. It also felt like the chair was expanding underneath him, and like he was sinking into it.

“Breathe in... and... breathe out” the doctor said, repeating that five times. His voice now sounded like it was talking through a wall; low and deep. Ben wanted to open his eyes, but they were heavy and tight. But with his eyelids shut, he could still see. He was back at the intersection. But not like in the dream. It was the moment he stepped out onto the road and a second before the accident. He could feel the cool morning air, heard the sounds of engines and car horns, and felt the worry he felt that morning knowing he was going to be late for work. Ben didn’t like this. It was like he was

back there, back in time. Not just a vivid memory, but actually reliving it. And he knew what was coming. As his body moved in the direction it had that day, without any control from his mind, Ben stepped out onto the road. But he didn't black out like before. Instead, everything around him seemed to slow down almost to a complete stop. The sounds of cars droned down to a slow groan, and the gentle breeze was no longer there. It was life in slow motion, but Ben continued to walk out onto the road at a normal pace. Still, as if he had no control at all, he sprung into action, and began to relive his heroic act he couldn't remember performing.

Looking to his left, Ben saw the large white bus, slowly charging towards the middle of the intersection. Remembering the news story, Ben looked to the tyres and saw each of them slowly shake and ripple, and then gradually explode. He could even see small bits of black rubber flying every which way, and he found himself lost in this close up view of intense detail. What was happening? Is this what happened? Did time slow down for him? No time to think about it, because even as things were slow for him, they were moving at a pace quick enough to still be of a threat, and thinking of his next move, Ben went to step back onto the pavement, but was reminded he wasn't in control. Instead he strode across the middle of the intersection, just as the bus flew past him. It was like watching a shark glide slowly past you just inches away on the other side of the aquarium glass. The bus continued on its deadly path, and Ben posed like a statue in the middle of the intersection, watching the carnage unfold. As the seconds passed, the accident continued to play out, gradually getting faster as it did. Ben's body moved in sharp, direct angles, dodging cars, rolling over objects, turning his head before he thought to do so, and saw the next part of the horror show play out for him. The flames rose around him, slow and sinister, like lava erupting from a volcano. He could feel the heat, but it was more warm and distant, even just inches from the fire. Smoke began to appear, as the truck then showed up, ploughing its way into the café, and Ben moved again. He leaped over cars, debris and in between two dancing flames and entered the café ahead of the truck. There were three people inside, each frozen in their stare towards the truck coming to kill them. Ben grabbed each of them one by one, pulling them behind the counter, and through the back door of the café, where they all fell to the ground. For a split second, Ben saw the woman who was making coffee look him in the eye, but he couldn't tell if she saw him. Maybe later she would recall the event, and remember only a blur of something sweeping in, pulling her away, and then being able to get up and walk out the back door. Ben recalled the news saying the people in the café had narrowly escaped the fire ball that then tore through café. But Ben was running back out the entrance of the café before it sparked and ploughed through in searing heat.

Back in action, Ben jumped over the dozens of gas cylinders spilled out on the road, watching each of them bounce and hop everywhere, but none touched him. Ben couldn't comprehend what he was experiencing. It was like having a superpower, and as he relived his daring act through his own eyes, he felt strong, and certain. Like he had been chosen for this. It was almost fun, but ultimately terrifying. Like a rollercoaster going faster and faster.

As the seconds slowly ticked by, the intensity of the accident grew all around him, and the scene began to look familiar. The two bodies Ben was told he had dragged out of the road were now becoming those limp bodies tumbling down in the centre of the intersection. The man and woman, who had run away from the truck that hit the cafe,

were going any direction they could to escape harm, and met the rogue gas cylinders on the road. The man was swept off his feet by one that bounced aggressively towards him, and his body hit the woman, who lost her balance. They both descended to the ground, hitting their heads, as Ben watched in awe. Again, his body knew what to do, and he walked over, took one of each under both his arms, and dragged them out. He recalled the woman who had helped him on the day, and how she described seeing Ben do this very thing. He looked across the road, and there she was. Standing on the pavement, her hands covering her shocked face, and their eyes met. The woman who would be there for Ben when he came to was in position, and he smiled at her. She didn't smile back, as all she saw was his dark figure emerging from the carnage, and then the smoke that enveloped him. Cue the smoke, billowing out from one of the naked flames, and as it did, time sped up again. It was almost a second for second now, and Ben's body took him in another direction. He sensed he was looking for his way out, and as he got through the smoke, there was another man standing in the middle of the intersection. He was unharmed, and strangely, smiling. He was dressed in black, and looked Ben right in the eyes. "You're not supposed to remember this" he said, in that same raspy voice from Ben's dream.

"Who are you?" Ben said

"Just playing with time, in my own way. Nice to see that watch again" the man said, pointing at Ben's wrist, then stood back, disappearing into the smoke. Ben was stuck. His feet were attached to the ground, and he couldn't move an inch. He looked to his left, sensing something was approaching him, as the building next door to the café was now alight, something inside had exploded, sending out a chunk of wood that hurtled towards Ben. It met his face, smacking with a loud thud, then there was blackness.

8

"Ben...Ben...you're back. Its okay" said the voice of Dr Jennings. Ben could hear him, but only see darkness. He threw his arms out, swinging and trying to feel where he was, when they were grabbed tightly.

"Open your eyes!" the doctor said, and Ben did. The psychologist face was in his, looking serious but safe. "You're back Ben. Do you know where you are?"

Ben stared into the doctor's eyes, and panted heavily.

"What the fuck was that?" Ben said, sitting up in the chair, pulling his arms away from the doctor.

"You were under the trance, do you remember. You're in suite 109 on the 19th floor" the doctor said, and Ben's breathing slowed. He began to recollect where he was. The doctor stood back, went to his desk, and returned with a glass of water. "Take this" he said softly. Ben pulled it out of the doctors hand, and downed the whole glass in one go.

"More" Ben said. He felt hot, his mouth was dry. "I was there. I was back there. That was no trance. Somehow I was back there"

"No you weren't, I assure you Ben. But I'm sure you have some questions..." the doctor asked assumingly, as he poured Ben another glass of water.

"Who was that man? The man dressed in black? He spoke to me. Knew about my watch. I'm really confused"

"I know Ben. You've experienced what we call TimePlay. You were meant to be at the accident that day. You were meant to survive. And this is not the first time

something like this has happened. In fact, it happened to your father as well” Doctor Jennings said, and Ben sat up like a blot of lightning.

“What?”

“Your father gave you that watch didn’t he? On your 19th birthday?” the doctor asked, handing Ben his water.

“How do you know that?”

“He told me. Because his father gave it to him on his 19th birthday. The accident occurred at 9:19am, on September 9th 2009. My office is on the 19th floor. Are you following me Ben?” asked the doctor, walking back to his desk and sitting down.

“I hear you, but what does the number have to do with anything?”

“More than you realise”

9

The doctor sat in silence, examining Ben, who clutched his glass of water with two tight hands. His whole body felt tense, and he thought about getting up and running out of the room. But he wanted answers, and still Doctor Jennings was quiet. Ben sipped some water, closed his eyes, and breathed out, trying to release the heaviness in his chest.

“Okay...” Ben finally said “Tell me. What happened to me? How do you know my father? Who was that man in the black clothes?”

“Let’s begin with what happened, shall we. Like I said, you experienced something called TimePlay; it’s where an individual is bestowed with the ability to slow down time for themselves, but only for one minute. In that minute you can still move at normal speed, but everyone and everything around you slows down, then every ten seconds, begins to return to its normal speed again”

“Right...” Ben said, trying to understand what was being said, but it made no fucking sense.

“I knew your father because when he was a young man, he experienced the same thing. But he was walking past some train tracks, and saw a woman trapped on the train lines. Her car had broken down as she tried to cut across the tracks before the train came. She couldn’t open her door, and a cargo train was headed straight for her. Your father, ran towards the car, then tripped, and blacked out. He doesn’t remember anything that happened for a minute, but was told by the woman, he pulled her out of the car, just a second before the train collided with it. He even dragged her to safety, and then ran around the corner, and that’s where he woke up. He came to me, and I took him through the same trance you just experienced. He was then able to remember the accident and what he did. I believe your father passed his ability to enter TimePlay down to you, and went on to experience several more incidents after the train. Did he never mention these accidents to you Ben?” the doctor asked in surprise. Ben stared at him in disbelief. He thought this was all an elaborate story, but something about Dr Tom Jennings’s smooth voice and warm eyes said he was telling the truth. Ben was willing to give into disbelief now, because he had no other explanation for what was going on.

“No, he never mentioned any of these things to me. But he told you about the watch he gave me?”

“Yes. He came and saw me one last time before he passed away, and that he had passed on the watch to you. He asked me to take care of you when TimePlay happened to you, and I promised him I would. When I heard about the accident at the intersection, I spoke to every doctor I know at all the major hospitals, and right

enough, you came in and got my card. And now here we are. And let me express my condolences in your fathers passing away. He was a good man” Dr Jennings said, with complete sincerity.

“Thank you. I really can’t believe all this. How is this even possible?” Ben asked bemused. He was rubbing his watch slowly.

“We don’t know. It’s rare, but it seems a special few are chosen I guess you could say. Your father, now you. And this is your first experience of TimePlay, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. Which is why you need to know about this man you saw”

“Who is he?” Ben asked, standing up from the chair and remaining in the centre of the room. He looked down at the doctor sternly, but Jennings remained cool and calm as he always did.

“You said he spoke to you? What did he say exactly Ben?”

“Something about playing with time in his own way”

“The Time-Gambler” Dr Jennings’s said. I was afraid of that. Did he give you a weird smile?”

“Yes. What’s this all about?”

“I know this is a lot for you to take in Ben, and I’m going to tell you more. Often fate throws us things we didn’t ask for, but it chooses us carefully. You’ve been chosen, like your father was, and now the more we know about TimePlay, we can learn from it. And maybe, just maybe... we can’t stop the four”

“Four what?”

“The four Players. You’ve met the Gambler. He likes to play games with peoples lives. He caused that accident”

“Why?”

“Because gamblers like to roll the dice and see what happens. They’re reckless and dangerous, especially when they get addicted”

“You gave him this name”

“No. Your father did”

“Tell me more”

“The other three dangerous players are the Time-Changer, the Time-Stealer and the Time-Watcher. They operate alone, but sometimes, they work together. The four of them together are deadly. Think of some of the biggest accidents and incidents in history. Where things happened with an irony and cruel set of circumstances that just were not fair or kind to anyone. Know what I mean?”

“Like...” Ben asked, prompting for those examples.

“Shootings in a crowded mall, bridge collapses at rush hour, planes hitting buildings on a certain date in September...”

“You’ve got to be kidding? That can’t be true. Terrorists hit those buildings. Mad gunmen shoot people. You’re saying these time players are responsible?”

“They pull the strings, but its people who commit the acts. But the good news is, there is the other four who are here to help us”

“And they are?” Ben asked, now hooked on this absurd but oddly believable story.

“The Time-Dealer, the Time-Borrower, the Time-Guard, and the Time-Builder. They control time and are more powerful than the deadly four, but those bastards are manipulative and sneak in undetected. That’s the problem. And now, you’re part of the solution”

“Okay, this is a lot take in doctor and you can understand if I find this hard to believe right?”

“Of course. Your father didn’t believe it either. But soon enough, it won’t matter if you believe it or not. You’re in the game now Ben. You are in TimePlay”

“So what do I do? Just go about my normal life? Hide away?”

“Live your life. Watch the signs. Keep track of time. And understand how numbers work for you and *against* you”

“How?” Ben asked, moving towards the office door. Doctor Jennings stood up, pulling a large yellow envelope from his desk drawer and following Ben to the door.

“This is everything we have. Read it. It will make more sense once you do”

“You keep saying *we*. Who else is part of this?”

“The good physician who examined you at the hospital. He gave you my card. We also have a few other individuals of various professions. You will meet them. And I’ll be in touch, but for now, go home. Rest up. And keep an eye on the time. It’s now your greatest ally and your greatest weapon”

“I don’t know what that means, but I’ll go home. Thanks...” Ben said, as he grabbed the envelope from the psychologist and walked out of the office.

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On the train ride home, Ben kept the yellow envelope sealed. He imagined it was not the kind of light reading you did on the train, and besides, he just wasn’t ready to open it. Looking through the glass window, the world outside looked different now. Almost staged or on display. It would never seem the same after that morning. And at every platform his train sopped at, Ben looked at the digital clock hanging from above. He studied the time each stop, trying to guess what the numbers meant.

At the second last stop before his, Ben was alone in his carriage, which was unsettling. As the doors opened, a man walked on at the far end of the carriage. He was wearing a blue suit and a wide brimmed hat. He stood near the doors as they closed, and the train began to move. Ben studied him, and the man smiled. Ben quickly looked behind him. The carriage was still empty, and the train was moving fast. Nowhere to go. Ben turned back around, to see the blue suit man sitting directly opposite him. He was still smiling, but not large white teeth were showing. This was a small smile; reserved. He took off his hat, and ran his hand through thick, black hair.

“Ah Ben, good to meet you. I realise I must have concerned you just then, as by now you’ve met my counterpart in the black suit. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Time-Dealer, and I have special job for you”

To Be Continued...

